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A PAINTER OF IDYLLS—BRUCE CRANE

Some unknown genius of philosophic bent has said, "Show me a great work, and I will point out its source." It is the fashion, in critical not less than in philosophical circles, to trace notable achievements back to fortuitous conditions and make great men the product of environment; and it may be said, apropos of the practice, that numberless are the egregious blunders for which this method of deduction is responsible. Facts upset theories, and individuality counts for more in human achievement than many thinkers are wont to allow. Nevertheless, it is a fact that a straw may change the bent of a stream and a chance circumstance may give direction to a life.

It was so in the case of Bruce Crane, one of the most idyllic of American landscape-painters. Behind this gifted artist is A. H. Wyant, and behind the long list of charming, poetic canvases he has produced are the equally charming and poetic works of the elder American painter and the canvases of the great French landscapists, such as Rousseau and Corot, which Wyant the teacher loved, and which Crane the pupil was taught to appreciate and to consider as models.

It is in a sense the cant of the biographer to talk of the turning-points of lives. Everybody has a turning-point, and nobody would be what he is did he not turn at the right point. The important fact is, which way one turns when the parting of the ways is reached. Crane turned the proper way, and Wyant merely determined the step.

Beyond this initial impulse the younger artist is responsible for his own development. He was too simple in his tastes to be wooed by



BRUCE CRANE
From a Photograph



FROSTY MORNING
By Bruce Crane

the theatrical or the grandiose, too idyllic to find charm in the tragic or heroic, too much of a poet to be content with outward appearances or to be satisfied with mere surface representations. Without knowing it, perhaps, he was a natural-born interpreter of commonplace nature, and this habit of seeking the hidden meaning of brook and meadow, sunshine and shadow, Wyant wisely fostered by precept and example. Crane spent only two months in Wyant's studio, but the relation of pupil and master, so soon severed, remained in fact for years a beneficent influence.

It is no small honor to an artist to see the poetic side of simple scenes, and to be able to invest his canvases with the charm that is ever latent in brook, meadow, hillside, since, as Alfred Trumble once pointed out, the painting of landscape is perhaps subject to the greatest abuse of any department of art. "There is certainly no other," said he, "in which the hand of incompetency so boldly displays itself.

"To paint the figure," continues this discerning critic, "requires a serious knowledge of form and of the most exquisite niceties of color, light, and shade. The same rule applies to the painting of cattle, and all forms of still life demand accuracy of observation, skill of draftsmanship, and a mastery of the rendition of colors and textures. In landscape the tyro who can neither draw nor paint, but

who has been schooled to a few tricks of brush and palette by an instructor, himself frequently if not commonly incompetent, produces what passes for an effect and is supposed to constitute a picture.

“Who that attends our exhibitions or visits the dealers’ galleries is not familiar with the weary waste of libels on the great art of Claude and Ruysdael, of Turner, Constable, Rousseau, Corot, Diaz, and the masters whose genius has carcaneted the brow of nature with gems of art, which passed the criticism of juries and tradesmen, and are given contemptible publicity?

“The true landscape-painter, however, remains as great an artist as the painter of history. Indeed, what is his vocation but the chronicling of the history of nature, so infinite in its varieties, so endless in its alternations of the lightest gayety and tragic gloom? To him nature is as living a thing as humanity itself. He knows and loves the organic vitality which burns in the mighty bosom of the earth, and sends the life-blood pulsating through tree and grass and flower. He reads the romance of summer showers sweeping over parched fields and meadow-lands, and of the time of the snow which blankets and protects the incessantly progressive life of nature against the fangs of the frost. The true landscape-painter is, in short, a poet as well



PASSING STORM
By Bruce Crane



THE YEAR'S WANE

By Bruce Crane

as an artist. He might be a painter of the figure if he chose, but he turns to nature in the form in which she appeals to him most eloquently. He reaches forth for his ideal according to his intellectual bent, and whether he paints his poems in the Homeric or the Horatian mood, he

is always the poet above all." Indubitable facts, and well expressed.

These quoted words express a profound truth which it would be well for all who aspire for honors in landscape-painting to consider duly. If a man have not interpretative sense, poetic insight, the gift of reading the message behind the symbol, if further he have not the ability to transfer his impressions to canvas and make his pigments eloquent of the divine meaning of nature, he may be a picture-maker, but he can never be a landscapist in the truest sense of the word.

No tricks of the palette can take the place of genuine inspiration, no massing of picturesque "effects" can approximate the simple appeal of nature, no studio invention can pass current for the living reality—meadows flecked with cloud shadows and dashed with flowers, skies luminous with palpitating light or aglow with sunrise promise or rich with the fading glories of the evening, winter in its winding-sheet of snow, autumn hiding its chill shudder under a cloak of russets and yellows, the fervid triumph



LANDSCAPE

By Bruce Crane

of noonday or moonlight with its mists and mysteries. These cannot be invented. One must seek them and feel their influence first-hand.

These realities of nature speak in runes which only the poet can read, and which only the poet-painter can express in color. Many can doubtless find in nature only a language of prose; many are content to accept this language of prose, and by a species of jugglery,



A BLACK CLOUD
By Bruce Crane

seek to parcel it out into feet and call it verse. Such may be versifiers, they are not poets; they may be chromo-makers, they are not landscape-painters.

There is more of the poetry of nature in the simplest scene truthfully rendered than in the most wondrous panorama of nature that lends itself readily to the production of striking effects. Crane chooses the simpler scenes and makes them eloquent. In this regard his attitude of mind and the trend of his effort are similar to those of that other American painter of idyllic bits of landscape, whose work was discussed in a recent issue of *BRUSH AND PENCIL*, J. Francis Murphy.

Crane comes naturally by his love of art. He was born in New York in 1857, and from his earliest years frequented galleries and

exhibition-rooms with his father, who was an ardent lover of pictures, and himself an amateur painter of no mean ability. Like many another artist who has attained distinction, he had a grounding in purely mechanical drawing. At seventeen, while residing in Elizabeth, New Jersey, he entered the office of an architect and builder, and there had his day of actual experience as a practical draftsman.

A chance meeting with some sketch-artists in the Catskills revived



THE LAST LEAF
By Bruce Crane

his boyhood's ambition to excel in pictorial art. The incident spoiled a promising architect, but gave to American art an admirable landscape-painter. The application for admission to the studio of Wyant followed, and as already stated, the teacher of two months gave direction to succeeding years of effort.

Crane went abroad in 1878, visiting the galleries of Liverpool and London, and finally landing in Paris, where for the first time he was brought in contact with the impressionists, at whose work he wondered deprecatingly, and by whose canvases he was confirmed in his loyalty to the selection of subjects and the methods of execution which he had adopted. Again, in 1880, in 1882, and frequently since, he revisited France, where he associated with the promising men of the day, and profited by such hints as would naturally come

from such association. His work in 1882 may be taken as a fair sample of that done during his other trips abroad. He spent the summer in the historic old town of Grez, near the forest of Fontainebleau, where his companions were Kenyon Cox, Coffin, Alexander and Birge Harrison, and other artists, all of whom have made for themselves an enviable name in art by the quality of their work.

Crane's work shows a decided evolution, and the change, which



COAST OF MAINE
By Bruce Crane

all admirers of his art unite in declaring one of improvement, results from the artist's positive convictions as to the needed trend of development in painting. Confident that this line of development should be in the direction of light and atmospheric effect, he has in a measure modified his early methods and has succeeded admirably in carrying his theories into effect. That he has not realized the full measure of his dream in thus striking a new note, Crane doubtless would be the first to acknowledge frankly. But he himself prefers his canvases of recent years, and his friends and critics attest the soundness of his judgment.

Concurrently with this change of method came a change in the selection of themes, which should be a source of satisfaction to his American friends and patrons. His work abroad naturally necessi-



WHITE FIELDS
By Bruce Crane

tated the transcription of foreign scenes, which were all characterized by judicious selection and marked by faithful local coloring. Of recent years, however, he has maintained his New York studio, and has worked largely in his country home in Connecticut, and his canvases have been as typical and as faithfully rendered bits of American landscape as those produced by any contemporary artists in this country.

Some time ago Crane gave public expression to his own practices, and his words will be not less interesting to the layman than to the professional artist. "My palette," said he, "is the same for studio and out of doors. There is an obvious advantage in using in your studies from nature the same pigments which you will use in your finished work; otherwise your pictures must be translations of translations. My palette includes only thirteen colors: flake white, strontium yellow, lemon cadmium, orange cadmium, yellow ochre, gold ochre, vermilion, rose madder, raw umber, permanent blue, vert emeraude, brown madder, and ivory black. You see at once from the predominance of light-toned pigments that I paint in a rather high key, but nature paints in a still higher key. I use a little siccatis de Haarlem and turpentine, rarely as a vehicle, usually only as a varnish. In general, if I wish to paint thinly—which seldom happens—I use a scrubby brush and rub the color into the canvas. I like to paint rather dry, and I believe that it conduces to permanence.

"The object of studying and sketching out of doors is to fill the memory with facts. It should therefore be exact and conscientious.

But in the studio the artist should use his knowledge freely. Nature seldom presents pictures ready-made, and the best effects last so short a time that it is impossible to study them directly. The most that can be done is to make a slight memorandum at the time, and afterwards return at about the same hour and study what is permanent in the scene—all this for the purpose of fixing the effect in the memory. For my part, I seldom look at a sketch when about to paint a picture. I do not need to do so except rarely, when I am in doubt about some particular point.

"I am aware that there are people who must have their documents before them when they go to compose a picture. I have seen students, after a whole session's study from nature, unable even to compose from their sketches, because they could not imagine so much as the proportion which a bramble in the foreground should hold to a tree in the distance. They could not even make a fence look of the right height. But it is better to be a little incorrect in a picture than to lose the beauty of line and color for the sake of which the picture is painted. One must know the bounds of possibility, which are only to be learned by much study from nature and from memory; but one should work quite freely within them. A work of art is not a scientific statement. It is enough if it be true to itself; that is to say, harmonious."

It is by the simple selection of colors, and the conscientious, painstaking methods here briefly outlined, that Crane has achieved his notable successes. His palette is partly a matter of personal choice



ROAD BY THE HAY-FIELD
By Bruce Crane

and partly a determined means for acquiring a desired effect, and his practice of making careful preliminary studies, and of elaborating them with such latitude as may be necessary to make an harmonious whole, is not essentially different from that adopted by most successful artists in a similar class of work.

After all is said and done, palette and practice are but means to a desired end, and the charm of the finished work depends, as already said, upon the feeling, the poetic insight, the individuality of the man behind the brush. It is these personal characteristics which make notable such canvases as "A Haystack," "The Harvest Field," "Apple Blossoms," "A Black Cloud," "Waste Land," "White Fields," "A New England Meadow," "Brown and Sere," "The Gray Hill," "Ripening Grain," and many another canvas which has elicited the admiration of the art-loving public.

They are all so simple and unpretentious, so instinct with the verity of the scene and season depicted, so devoid of mere technical display, that bane of display canvases, so direct in their appeal, so devoid of studied effects, that one accepts them and rejoices in their finished beauty as one accepts and rejoices in a sweet melody by a composer or a tender lyric by a poet. One thinks little of the art and less of the artist—the picture alone claims attention for the simple message it imparts.

Crane is represented in many private and public galleries, and the appreciation of a kindly public has made his work in demand. Since he began to exhibit in the National Academy of Design in 1879, his canvases have regularly been hung in the principal annual displays. He is an associate member of the National Academy, a member of the American Water-Color Society, of the Society of American Artists, of the New York Water-Color Club, of the Society of American Landscape-Painters, and of the Arts Club. He is, moreover, a forceful writer on art subjects. In the matter of prizes and honors, he has been singularly fortunate. In 1897 he won the Webb prize at the Society of American Artists for the best landscape exhibited; at the Paris Exposition of 1900 he won a bronze medal; and at the National Academy of Design in 1900 he carried off the George Inness gold medal for the best landscape. Silver medals were accorded him at the Pan-American Exposition in 1901 and at the Charleston Exposition in 1902, and only recently he received the honor of the Salmagundi Purchase Fund.

HAROLD T. LAWRENCE.